

*Moral Tradition and Individuality*  
Princeton University Pr, Princeton, NJ, 1999  
245 pg — \$24.95 by John Kekes

*Facing Evil*  
Princeton University Press, Princeton, NI. 1990  
250 pg — \$24 95 by John Kekes  
Reviewed by Henry Scuoteguazza

While I was researching my paper, *Is Self-Interest Enough?* I had the pleasure of discovering a number of philosophers who were reviving interest in Aristotle and the Greek approach to ethics. Out of these dozen or so philosophers, two stand out: David Norton, who wrote *Personal Destinies*, and John Kekes, a philosopher at the State University of New York at Albany. He has written a series of interesting books, such as *A Justification of Rationality*, *The Nature of Philosophy*, *The Examined Life*. *Moral Tradition and Individuality*, and *Facing Evil*. Kekes is an Aristotelian although he explores new territory rather than restricting his work, like some scholars, to analyzing every word Aristotle wrote. Since he is Aristotelian, Kekes advocates living for your self with reason as your guide. Still, there are important differences between him and Ayn Rand. I thought it would be useful to offer an extended review of his two most recent books, *Moral Tradition and Individuality* and *Facing Evil*.

Given the fact this is a review I'm sure I won't do justice to the depth and nuances of his argument, but I hope that by hitting the high points you will be enticed to read his books. I have found than thought provoking and challenging. I have to warn you Kekes argues for a number of premises with which you may disagree. Objectivists still could benefit from this summary for a number of reasons. First, the differences in Kekes' thinking might spur your thinking on some issues. Second, Kekes offers a fleshed out morality which hints at the kind of work that needs to be done in Objectivism. Many of Rand's followers have mistaken the foundation she laid for the entire building. Third, it's interesting to see how someone can take a different route yet still end up with some of the same conclusions as Rand. And, fourth, I hope you're encouraged, like I am, to find other challenging philosopher, besides Rand.

Briefly, *Moral Tradition and Individuality* discusses what is involved in living a good life, while *Facing Evil* tackles the subject of trying to lessen the amount of evil which can threaten our attempt to live a good life.

*Moral Tradition and Individuality* covers the relationship of individuals and tradition, a subject Rand did not address much. When she mentioned

tradition, it was usually to discount or disparage it. Kekes builds a case on a case for observing reasonable moral tradition. He claims such traditions are founded on the fact that humans share certain universal aspects of existence: the facts of the body, self and social life.

The facts of the body cover of physiology, sensory organs, and our capacities to feel, think, will, imagine and use language. Facts of the self relate to our talents, weaknesses, and attitudes we have towards family, illness, death, success, failure, sexual relations and authority. And, facts of social life deal with vulnerability, limited resources for intelligence, energy, reproduction, child rearing and the division of labor. "The facts of the body, self and social life constitute part of the foundation of human motivation, for we all want to protect the conditions in which we can obtain the benefits and avoid the harms that human characteristics define. Thus, the facts of the body, self and social life establish what must be the minimum conditions for human welfare. To protect these conditions is to benefit us, and so it is good." A reasonable moral tradition safeguards these conditions by establishing "deep" and "variable" conventions.

"Deep conventions" are needed to establish conditions in which participants in a moral tradition can satisfy universal human wants created by the facts of the body, self and social life. Variable conventions are needed to enable participants to make good lives for themselves, once these universal wants are satisfied. These variable conventions address such activities as public confession, cohabiting of extended families and the arrangement of marriages. A moral tradition is the collection of deep and variable conventions in a society.

Kekes feels that our culture has features that are life enhancing, despite the altruist influence that exists, because parts of our tradition protect these facts of the body, self and social life and in so doing create a stable, predictable framework within which we can pursue our individual concepts of the good life. A sound moral tradition provides opportunities for self-direction and intimate personal relationships as well as creating the conditions in which goodwill and decency prevail.

Kekes claims we need, in addition to our personal morality which guides us in obtaining values, a social morality, guided by reason and based on decency and, ultimately, sympathy. This morality would help us live and work with others. Decency is displayed in civic friendship, a well-wishing and well-doing towards fellow members of a moral tradition. The purpose of social morality is to protect the welfare of its members, ensure cohesion, and foster decency. It also establishes common behavioral cues (gestures, frowns, smiles, nods, scowls, laughter and etc.), rituals (such as birth,

marriage, death, graduations, birthdays and holidays) and ceremonies (hand shakes, sharing meals, kissing, and expressing respect, condolences and sympathy) and creates the conditions for plurality. All of these work in concert to allow to live good lives in a social setting.

### *SELF-DIRECTION*

To balance these aspects of personal and social morality, we need self-direction, which consists of three components: breadth, depth and objectivity. To have breadth means being aware of the potential complexity of moral situations. Depth entails being cognizant and tolerant of the various moralities by which people live. And need I say anything about objectivity? Moreover, self-direction includes a moral perspective. One that is rich (i.e., guides us in routine and non-routine moral situations), realistic, appealing and has latitude for change. Developing our moral perspective is the process of becoming self-directed. Our moral perspective helps us live a good life if it (1) helps us satisfy wants created by the body, self and social life, (2) leads us to observe reasonable deep and variable conventions, and (3) has order, coherence, richness, realism, appeal and latitude for change. Integrity, according to Kekes, means adhering to the pattern of hierarchically organized commitments of our moral perspective.

Lastly, we could look at all this and ask how do we know if I'm living a good life? Kekes offers three tests: (1) we have character traits necessary for self-direction, (2) we are free of doubts and don't wish to change how we have lived in fundamental ways, and (3) we have obtained value both external to us and internally and we're happy with them.

I have condensed a lot of his discussion and elaboration of these concepts, so I'll attempt to summarize. Part of living a good life entails pursuing and obtaining values, of course. But it also means acting decently and observing reasonable moral traditions. This process is guided by self-direction which reflects our moral perspective. We need to balance our wants, capacities and moral tradition. The question we need to keep before us are: "Do I want to become the sort of person who does such things?"

As I said before, Objectivists don't talk much about traditions. Part of this comes from the belief that our culture is so thoroughly imbued with altruism there can't be much good in it. However, like common law, there are a number of aspects in our tradition which have evolved out of concern for protecting the individual or helping us enjoy significant events in our life. They include, for example, rituals such as baptism for celebrating newborns, weddings which honor the public proclamation of love and commitment of two people, and funerals which provide solace and comfort for the grieving

survivors. Many others function to ensure our privacy is respected and govern casual interactions such as greetings, introductions, farewells, etc.

A lot of this appears to be unimportant and, therefore, subject to scorn or ridicule. But, as I have learned in dealing with some Objectivists, such niceties are sorely missed when not offered. I have given several talks where I had to introduce myself to a group of people I had not met before. Traditionally, hosts are expected to introduce guests as a way of welcoming them and to help make the guest feel comfortable. Because some Objectivists perceive such traditions as lacking rational foundation, they dispense with them. I believe Kekes succeeds in defending these traditions.

### ***FACING EVIL***

Be that as it may, we can try as best we can to live a good life and still be thwarted. Worse, we can be harmed by the actions of others, or even by ourselves. Christians and other mystics build hope into their world view to cope with this. They believe a benevolent order underlies the real world that works to ensure the scales of justice balance out, that the virtuous are rewarded and the evil punished, if not in this world, then the next. So Christians can hope they will get their due. (Kekes calls this the “transcendental temptation.”) But what about atheists and agnostics? If there is no hidden enforcer of truth, what can we hope for? Should we abandon the concept? This is the subject of *Facing Evil*.

The first order of business for Kekes is to offer his definition of evil. Simply put, evil is undeserved harm. It is an appropriate concern for morality because evil is an obstacle to a good life. Morality, then, is a practical concern: it strives to make things better by helping us obtain values and by helping us avoid evil. Kekes builds upon three themes: (1) simple evil provides morality with an objective basis, (2) choice is irrelevant (e.g., it is irrelevant whether or not you chose to cause evil — it is the fact you caused it what counts. The amount of moral censure or punishment you receive would be mitigated by whether or not you chose to cause undeserved harm.), and (3) if vices dominate one’s character, we are justified in judging them as evil.

### ***ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS OF LIFE***

Kekes also lists three essential conditions of life. First, there is no cosmic justice. The universe is neither benevolent nor malevolent — it’s indifferent to human’s fate. This ties into the second condition: our lives are subject to contingency. There are large areas of our life beyond our control. Third, and perhaps most controversial, destructiveness can be an active force within us.

We can cause as much harm to ourselves as any enemy. In fact, much of the evil we suffer is actually caused by unchosen actions.

Kekes claims a large portion of our character is formed well before we have the capacity for rational, deliberate choice. From the moment we are born we are inculcated in the moral traditions of our culture. Our character is influenced by our interactions with our families, friends and others. Consequently, many of our acts do not involve conscious deliberation. Our actions flow from our character.

Kekes claims there are three types of unchosen actions. The first, insufficiency, is the inadequate development of some capacity required for moral conduct and include three types: cognitive, emotive and weakness. An example of cognitive insufficiency is dogmatism, which can result from living in an environment that does not welcome critical thinking. Insufficiency in moral agents can lead them to become instruments of contingency, to cause undeserved harm.

Expediency, the second form of insufficiency, is the vice of pursuing value, with no regard for the potential of causing undeserved harm to others. Kekes doesn't say it explicitly but expediency means treating others as disposable means to your ends.

Malevolence completes the list of the forms of insufficiency. One likely way for a person to adopt a malevolent perspective comes from them being treated by contempt by society because they belong to a disfavored group. Perhaps they have a handicap or even an ethnic heritage that most people find undesirable. Hence, in the process of receiving abuse from their fellows, the person begins to expect the worst from everyone and acts accordingly.

In all three cases — insufficiency, expediency and malevolence — the perpetrator of evil may not even consciously chose his actions. They may flow naturally from his character. Kekes does not say it this way, but I see his concept of character running parallel to Rand's concept of emotions. Just as emotions are automatic internal responses to events that have been interpreted by our beliefs and ideas, unchosen actions can be our automatic external responses that are driven by to virtues and/or vices we have built into our self. For the most part we act and experience emotions on auto-pilot. We pause to reflect on what to do or why we feel or acted because the situation is not simple or straightforward. We stop to figure out, in the case of emotions, why our feelings may conflict with one another or with our conscious beliefs.

Kekes is not pushing determinism or cultural relativism. He is challenging

the idea that all actions are consciously chosen. He also questions the validity of judging the evil acts only by conscious intentions. He sees us as influenced greatly by our traditions, to the point that we may not even recognize when we are. Morality, which deals with how we act (and therefore how we live), covers more than just what we consciously choose to do. We should judge people by how they act and the consequences of their actions. If someone consistently, yet unintentionally, causes undeserved harm to others or themselves, we would have to conclude he or she harbors a character flaw. This flaw is responsible for evil even if the perpetrator was operating with innocent intentions. We would still hold him culpable, just as a jury could rule accidental death as involuntary manslaughter. This person should obviously not be treated the same as a person who intends to cause harm. But the point Kekes makes is whether or not the person consciously hurts others (or himself) is irrelevant. The important feature of facing evil is recognizing evil actions are judged by their consequences; the harshness of the judgment may be mitigated by the person's motives and knowledge.

The error of focusing strictly on someone's intentions leads us "step by innocuous step away from one central concern morality, namely, with minimizing evil, and we are led toward a merely secondary concern, that of assigning the appropriate degree of responsibility for the evil that has been done. But the latter presupposes the former, and unless we face evil, the question of responsibility can have no reasonable answer.

## **TRUE HOPE AND THE REFLECTIVE TEMPER**

"The prospect of true hope in the face of unchosen evil is thus intimately connected with the possibility of extending within ourselves the area we can control."

This leads Kekes to describe the "reflective temper" as a means of dealing with evil. First; we need to enlarge our understanding of the essential conditions of life: the universe is indifferent, our lives are vulnerable to contingency, and we can be a source of destructiveness or evil if we are insufficient, weak or malevolent. Second, our aim is to modify our own psychological states to increase our control of actions. We can work to understand what motivates us. As Kekes says: "The development of character is the long process of trying to find a fit between our predispositions and the available forms for translating them into action. In some lives, this process is more informed by choices than in others. But even in lives where choices figure predominantly, the choices express the capacities and possibilities the individuals have prior to choices. Of course, among the prior capacities choices reflect is the capacity to choose itself. So, from the moral point of view, characters are vastly more important than the

choices that stem from them. This is why attention to character is likely to bring us greater moral depth than attention to choices which are merely the epiphenomenon of character.

While we can't control what feelings we have, we can control how large a role they play in motivating us. And the reasonable policy is to allow them to move us only when they are consonant with our understanding of evil and with our intellectual motivation to avoid it."

The motivation to increase our control over ourselves and the capacity to restrain our emotional reactions comprise the remaining two components of the reflective temper.

Just as a reasonable moral tradition should have deep and variable conventions which help make living a good life possible, so should it have prohibitions to mark areas off limits to us. Many prohibitions in our culture (such as the taboo against cannibalism) protect the fundamental requirements of our welfare. They also help guarantee the cohesion of society by supporting order and the fulfillment of our reasonable expectations about some limits that the conduct of others will not trespass. They constitute part of the framework in which people can endeavor to live good lives."

What does all of this say about the scope of true hope? "The enlarged understanding I am recommending permits true hope because it saves those who possess it from the futility of hounding the unresponsive heavens to relieve their misfortune and because it prepares the people who have grown to develop it to pick up the damaged pieces if they can be picked up, and go on. True hope does not come from there being a guarantee that good projects reasonable conducted will succeed. It comes from the confidence that we have done what is in our power to make them succeed and that if they fail despite our merits and efforts, we need not be destroyed as a result."

As I said earlier, you may not agree with all of the positions taken by Kekes. Sometimes we can learn more from someone like Kekes who is generally on our side yet arrives at his conclusions by a different path. The exercise of evaluating these ideas should improve our understanding of our philosophy. I hope any of you who do read his books will agree with me.